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Has Occupy Had an Impact?

by Luke Martell, published on *Bright Green* 22 September 2012

This week was the first birthday of Occupy Wall Street. It returned to Manhattan to mark the occasion. In the UK, occupations kicked off in the student sit-ins of winter 2010. Further afield street protest spread from Spain across Europe to North America. People took to the squares in Arab states.

Occupy identified the cause of the financial crisis as short-term, greedy, risk-taking capitalism. It's been accused of lacking policy proposals. Yet politicians' solutions haven't addressed the roots of it all. Gordon Brown and Obama threw money at the crisis to keep the system going. But they shied away from the best opportunity they will have to seriously and jointly regulate global capital.

In fact, Occupy has said what needs to be done, in practical proposals for Robin Hood taxes and global regulation. It's governments that are failing to do these, not the occupiers.

Inequality, specifically between the very richest and the rest, is widely known about and accepted as an issue. We didn't used to talk about this that much. We do now. Occupy did that. If anything the danger is its ideas will be co-opted and disarmed in politicians' weak proposals for 'responsible capitalism'.

The protests of the 2010s have also been about the welfare state that gave security and opportunities to postwar generations. This is being torn from under the feet of the current young, justified by deficit reduction but clearly ideological.

Of course, you can say that the wider public haven't been voting against capitalism. But that's not what Occupy's about. It hasn't stood for election. But its words are on peoples' lips. In a poll a year ago more than half agreed that 'protesters are right to want to call time on a system that puts profit before people'.

I visited two occupations during the UK's sit-in fever of 2010. I was struck by their engagement and good humour. Occupation 'security' at one looked me up and down and said, with a smile, that people with jeans weren't allowed in. Those I was at brought out the best in people, or maybe they just had the best people. They were non-sectarian and open, even to a suited banker who spoke at one.

In the anti-capitalist protests of the last two years a variety of leftists who would have spat bile at one another in the past held together. The ethos was that we are all on the same side.

Outside one building in the bitter cold I talked to occupiers who had volunteered for door-keeping duty to avoid meetings. They said they hated the politics. Decision-making was inclusive and based on reaching consensus. It could be long and painful. Yet many decisions were made effectively because of the energy and sense of common purpose. The occupations were hives of activity. There was a division of labour, but it developed organically.

There wasn't the control-freakery you can get in trade unions, and occupiers had the imagination to think of new methods that would go somewhere, rather than tired means not suited to the situation in hand. British unions admitted they'd been shown a thing or two about anti-austerity by the student movement.

Unions are essential for protecting workers day-to-day, but on large-scale issues they look weak and lumbering.

This can mean the middle class, precariat and unemployed organise over the working class whose representatives aren't keeping up. The young have been a key part, and are more aware of power than their parents. Gender has looked balanced in the protests I've been to.

The Bank of Ideas occupation I visited put on education and entertainment from first thing to the end of the evening. Its mission statement was that all transactions were allowed, apart from financial ones. At one talk someone proposed we set up a free university. Within days this was up and running. Its slogan: 'free from state, market and profit'. It's still going, held together by little more than a Facebook group, enthusiasm and solidarity.

Social media, and a generation who know how to use it, has meant leaders and hierarchies aren't needed. You can get a protest going horizontally, and spread the message peer-to-peer, rather than being confined to the corporate and state media. Smartphone filming allows monitoring of the police. It makes media lies less easy to propagate. The phone can record the truth and provide a fact-checking facility.

I've had experience of policing, from being with arrested people in police stations, to dark and frozen picket lines in the 1980s miners strike. I've put down problems I've experienced to a lot of bad apples mixed up with some good ones.

But the policing of protest has told us a lot. Sometimes it's been aggressive and brutal. Protestors are arrested for the innocuous, even just for being there. In 2011, jails in Britain took in a cohort of heavily sentenced political prisoners from riots and demos. Where I live, intelligence officers turn up at activists' doors to intimidate, under the pretext of 'protestor liaison'.

What's here to stay are the ideas of Occupy. At the narrowest they expose the immorality of vacant buildings and what can be done with them. More widely they show that the capitalism we have is a problem. The critique of capitalism and greed has gone mainstream because of Occupy, 20 years after the collapse of authoritarian socialism made it difficult to even speak about such things.

With no power or economic resources, the Occupy movement has been facing up against those with the most concentrated power in the world. It's highlighted what and who have put us in the situation we're in. With the only capital it has being the people who make it up, it's made this something the public relate to.

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